A Dream

POEM TEXT

Once a dream did weave a shade
O'er my angel-guarded bed,
That an emmet lost its way
Where on grass methought I lay.

Troubled, wildered, and forlorn,
Dark, benighted, travel-worn,
Over many a tangle spray,
All heart-broke, I heard her say:

"Oh my children! do they cry,
Do they hear their father sigh?
Now they look abroad to see,
Now return and weep for me."

Pitying, I dropped a tear:
But I saw a glow-worm near,
Who replied, "What wailing wight
Calls the watchman of the night?

"I am set to light the ground,
While the beetle goes his round:
Follow now the beetle's hum;
Little wanderer, hie thee home!"

SUMMARY

One time, lying in my bed under the protection of my guardian angel, I had this dream: an ant was wandering around lost in the grass where it seemed I was lying.

Anxious, lost, and miserable; confused and weary from traveling; clambering across snarled twigs and branches, heart-broken, I heard her exclaim:

"Oh no, my babies! Are they weeping? Is their dad sighing with worry and fear? One moment they look around to see if I'm there, the next they go home to grieve for me."

Touched by the ant's misfortunes, I cried: but then I caught sight of a glow-worm nearby, who answered the ant, "What weeping creature do I hear calling for the night guardian?

"I'm posted here to illuminate the earth while the beetle walks his usual beat. Listen for the sound of the beetle and follow it; get on home, little traveler!"

THEMES

GUIDANCE, PROTECTION, AND COMPASSION

William Blake's "A Dream" recounts the speaker's dream of a lost emmet (or ant) who has been separated from her children and husband. This dilemma, which seems to represent the speaker's own lonely bewilderment, gets resolved when the ant cries out for pity, and a friendly "glow-worm" guides her home. Told from a trusting, childlike perspective, the poem suggests that those who ask for help will get it: the world is a naturally compassionate place, and guidance and protection are always at hand, even in difficult times.

The speaker paints a picture of a natural world filled with kindly creatures that are readily willing to help one another. When the little ant cries out for her husband and children, a "glow-worm" (or firefly) quickly responds. The glow-worm acts as an illuminator and a protector, "set to light the ground" and guide the "travel-worn" ant.

And this glow-worm isn't the only helpful creature around around! It instructs the ant to "follow [...] the beetle's hum," which will lead her home. The beetle, then, is also a source of guidance and protection. The idea that the beetle is "go[ing] his round" (or doing rounds) further suggests that it is simply his job to keep an eye out for those who need help. And, of course, the ant herself is trying to get home to protect her own "children," to give them the same kind of comfort and care that the glow-worm and beetle offer.

By setting this dream of lost-and-found drama in a version of the natural world filled with benevolent creatures, the speaker suggests that—at least from a perspective of "innocence"—the world is an inherently compassionate place, even and especially when one feels lost.

Of course, all this talk about ants and glow-worms is really an allegory—a story meant to illuminate a truth about the *human* world. The glow-worm's readiness to lead and care for the ant makes it much like the protective angel that "guard[s]" the speaker's bed. In fact, the phrasing of the lines in which the speaker describes the ant as "troubled, wildered, and forlorn" makes it sound as though they could as easily refer to the speaker themselves. And when the ant cries out in sorrow and loneliness, the speaker's compassionate tears over the ant's plight suggest that the speaker shares those feelings.

This dream, in other words, is telling the speaker something about their own life and difficulties. This dream has a message:

friendly (and, given the nod to the "angel" at the poem's start, divine) guidance is always available to those who ask for it.

At the same time, the poem concludes without the reader ever finding out whether the ant makes it home—so although the poem ends on a hopeful, seemingly all-is-well note, there's plenty of room for less tidy interpretations.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Once a dream did weave a shade
O'er my angel-guarded bed,
That an emmet lost its way
Where on grass methought I lay.

The poem opens with the speaker recounting a dream they once had. The speaker personifies the dream as a kind of mysterious weaver, saying that it "w[ove] a shade / O'er [the speaker's] angel-guarded bed."

This moment can be taken literally, suggesting the "shad[y]" darkness of the night. But here, it might be more fitting to think of this "shade" as a kind of enchantment. In other words, a dream cast a spell on the speaker, so that instead of feeling safe and protected in their bed, the speaker thinks they are lying on "grass" in the darkness of night, witnessing the distraught wanderings of a lost "emmet," or ant.

The fact that the speaker is *dreaming* of the ant (rather than just observing an ant in the real world) suggests that the ant is of some personal significance to the speaker; the speaker, it seems, relates to this little lost ant, wandering in the darkness.

The poem immediately contrasts "shade," or darkness, with the speaker's "angel-guarded bed," suggesting that these two things are at odds. In the dream, it seems, the sleeper is afraid of not being able to find a way back to the waking, benevolent world of their bedroom—or perhaps they're just feeling lost and bewildered in their waking life.

Either way, this dream will work rather like a fable, a morality tale with a cast of anthropomorphized animals. This will be a tale of being lost and found, lonely and protected.

LINES 5-8

Troubled, wildered, and forlorn,
Dark, benighted, travel-worn,
Over many a tangle spray,
All heart-broke, I heard her say:

In the second stanza, the speaker describes the lost ant's woes, describing it as "Troubled, wildered, and forlorn, / Dark, benighted, travel-worn." But take another look at the grammar here:

> Troubled, wildered, and forlorn,
> Dark, benighted, travel-worn,
> Over many a tangle spray,
> All heart-broke, I heard her say:

These lines are clearly meant to describe the ant. But they're constructed in such a way that they could just as easily be meant to describe the speaker! Again, the dream-ant seems like the speaker's alter ego, here—a picture of the "trouble," confusion, and weariness the speaker feels in their everyday life.

The many caesurae in lines 5-6 create a halting, stumbling rhythm that evokes the ant's weariness and confusion. But by using that same rhythm twice, the poem also starts to feel like a nursery rhyme. That fits right in with the meter here. The poem is written in trochaic tetrameter—that is, lines of four trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm. That pattern will be familiar to anyone who's ever heard a nursery rhyme: it's the same rhythm one finds in "Jack and | Jill went | up the | hill," for instance. The poem's simple rhyming couplets only add to the singsong effect.

All these childlike sounds suggest the "innocence" of the speaker; this is, after all, one of Blake's "Songs of Innocence," which take a child's-eye view of both the beauties and the terrors of the world. But this ant's troubles, as readers will soon learn, feel more adult: lost, she's fretting for her family, all alone at home.

In this dream, the speaker is lying on the grass. But they still seem to see the world from the ant's perspective, saying that the ant has crossed "Over many a tangle spray." In other words, to the tiny ant, the twisted, knotty grass might as well be an obstacle course. This rugged landscape (again, from the ant's perspective—for the speaker, it's just grass!) mirrors the ant's "troubled" emotional state, perhaps in the same way that the dream mirror's the speaker's own troubles.

The poem continues to anthropomorphize the ant, describing her as "All heart-broke." Notice the effectiveness here of saying "heart-broke" as opposed to "heart-broken": not only does dropping the "n" imitate the imperfect speech of a young child, it also evokes the very brokenness it's describing.

LINES 9-12

"Oh my children! do they cry,
Do they hear their father sigh?
Now they look abroad to see,
Now return and weep for me."

In the third stanza, the speaker hears the ant crying out for her family, from whom she's been separated. The poem continues to anthropomorphize the ant: she can speak and has human

emotions.

In lines 9-10, she says:

> "Oh my children! || do they cry,
> Do they hear their father sigh?

The strong caesura in line 9 draws a lot of attention to the ant's main concern: her children. She isn't just distressed because she herself is lost and weary; she is wracked with anxiety for her children, not knowing if they are okay. In other words, the ant is a loving, compassionate creature trying to find her way home so she can take care of her family.

And listen to her repetitions as she worries for them:

> Now they look abroad to see,
> Now return and weep for me."

The anaphora on the word "now" here (like the anaphora on the word "do" in the first two lines of the stanza) suggests that every moment brings fresh worry and misery for the ant, who knows how confused and frantic her children must be without her. Anaphora also underlines the poem's simple rhythm, which again brings to mind children's rhymes.

LINES 13-16

> *Pitying, I dropped a tear:*
> *But I saw a glow-worm near,*
> *Who replied, "What wailing wight*
> *Calls the watchman of the night?*

Stanza 4 begins with the speaker "dropp[ing]" a sympathetic "tear" for the ant. The speaker's compassion might come from a place of pure, childlike empathy—or it may be a sign that the speaker relates to the ant's situation, feeling lost and alone in the strange land of the dream (or in their waking life).

But the speaker only has time to shed a single teardrop before catching sight of a "glow-worm"—that is, a luminous bug, like a firefly. This glow-worm responds to the ant's piteous cries, asking:

> [...] "What wailing wight
> Calls the watchman of the night?

The bold, attention-grabbing /w/ alliteration here suggests the glow-worm is clearly an important character, one worth listening to.

Now, just as it did at the beginning, the poem contrasts darkness and bewilderment with protection and safety. While in the first stanza the speaker contrasted the darkness of the dream with the comfort of an "angel-guarded bed," the poem now juxtaposes the darkness of night with the luminescence of the "glow-worm." The glow-worm, or "watchman of the night," thus takes on symbolic resonance: like the angel in the first stanza, the glow-worm is a figure of divine guidance and protection, a reminder that the ant—and by extension, the speaker—is not alone.

LINES 17-20

> *"I am set to light the ground,*
> *While the beetle goes his round:*
> *Follow now the beetle's hum;*
> *Little wanderer, hie thee home!"*

In the final stanza, the glow-worm speaks, saying that it is its job to "light the ground / While the beetle goes his round." In other words, the glow-worm lights up the night so that the beetle can make his ordinary journey—and the glow-worm can do the same for the ant. Again, the glow-worm feels like an angelic figure, a guardian who's just waiting to offer the ant insight and direction.

All the ant has to do to get home safe, this benevolent glow-worm suggests, is to follow the "beetle's hum"—a cozy image that suggests that, in the glow-worm's light, the whole world suddenly looks a lot less menacing. Wandering along casually humming to himself, it's as if the beetle were just walking home from work, not going on a terrible journey through the "tangle spray" of the wilderness.

Listen to the alliterative music in the poem's last lines:

> Follow now the beetle's hum;
> Little wanderer, hie thee home!"

All those gentle /h/ sounds evoke the beetle's musical "hum"—and might suggest the poem's own significance. Like the soft "hum" of the beetle, a poem can be a kind of guide, leading one back towards a childlike understanding and appreciation of the world. But the slant rhyme between "hum" and "home" is more subtle than the majority of the poem's end rhymes, perhaps hinting that such music is not always easy to hear.

The glow-worm's instruction can just as easily apply to the speaker: after all, the speaker is a "little wanderer" of sorts as well, lost in a dream, but still "angel-guarded." But because the poem ends with the glow-worm's speech, it isn't certain whether the ant actually makes it home; there's still a tiny edge of danger and uncertainty here.

What is important, though, isn't whether or not the ant takes the glow-worm's advice and makes it home, but rather that the ant's cries for help were heard and met. In other words, the poem implies that the world is a compassionate place, all the way down to its bugs—and that divine guidance and protection are always available to those who are in need.

SYMBOLS

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

The poem uses darkness to symbolize confusion, loneliness, and being lost, while light represents guidance, protection, compassion, and being found.

The poem contrasts darkness and light right away, with the speaker saying that the lost ant of the dream was "dark, benighted." In other words, darkness is associated with being anxious, lost, and miserable.

Later in the poem, the speaker sees a glow-worm, a kind of insect which sheds light. The glow-worm offers to help the ant, and refers to itself as the "watchman of the night." In other words, the glow-worm, through the act of "light[ing] the ground," is going to help the ant find her way home. In this way, light is associated with guidance, protection, and being found.

Darkness and light may also symbolize ignorance and enlightenment. Early in the poem, the speaker describes the ant as "Dark" and "benighted" (which means ignorant). The ant is unhappy *because* she is ignorant—i.e. she doesn't know where she is or how to find her way home. However, with divine guidance (i.e. the help of a glow-worm, or an "angel"), the ant finds a way home. In this way, darkness and light relate to knowing and not knowing.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Dark, benighted"
- **Lines 14-16:** "But I saw a glow-worm near, / Who replied, "What wailing wight / Calls the watchman of the night?"
- **Line 17:** ""I am set to light the ground,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration gives the poem musicality and intensity.

In the second stanza, for example, hard, thorny /t/ alliteration ("Troubled," "travel-worn," "tangle") gives way to softer /h/ alliteration:

> All heart-broke, I heard her say:

The breathy /h/ sounds evoke the ant's piteous tears—and the speaker's gentle "Pity[]" for her suffering.

In lines 15-16, meanwhile, intense /w/ alliteration draws attention to the glow-worm's speech:

> Who replied, "What wailing wight
> Calls the watchman of the night?

These moments of alliteration suggest the glow-worm's importance in the world of this poem: all those /w/ sounds ring out boldly, highlighting the glow-worm's words. In addition to the more closely packed /w/ alliteration in these lines, there is also spread-out /w/ alliteration (and consonance) in the lines before and after (such as "glow-worm" in line 14).

Finally, in the last two lines of the poem, /h/ alliteration feels both gentle and tidy:

> Follow now the beetle's hum;
> Little wanderer, hie thee home!

This alliteration makes the slant rhyme between "hum" and "home" stand out, making the phrase "hie thee home" feel like a memorable ending.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dream," "did"
- **Line 5:** "Troubled"
- **Line 6:** "travel"
- **Line 7:** "tangle"
- **Line 8:** "heart," "heard"
- **Line 14:** "worm"
- **Line 15:** "What," "wailing," "wight"
- **Line 16:** "watchman"
- **Line 19:** "hum"
- **Line 20:** "hie," "home"

ASSONANCE

Moments of assonance help to give the poem its musical, nursery-rhyme tone.

For instance, listen to the balanced sounds in these lines:

> Who replied, "What wailing wight
> Calls the watchman of the night?

Those paired long /i/ sounds and soft /ah/ sounds make the glow-worm's speech feel gentle and singsongy—and thus make the glow-worm itself sound like a comforting presence.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dream," "weave"
- **Line 2:** "bed"
- **Line 3:** "emmet"
- **Line 8:** "heard her"
- **Line 12:** "weep," "me"
- **Line 15:** "replied," "wight"
- **Line 16:** "Calls," "watchman"

- **Line 19:** "Follow now"

IMAGERY

Imagery helps the reader to imagine the dark, dangerous, but ultimately benevolent world of the speaker's dream.

In the world of the dream, the speaker is lying in the grass, and sees a lost ant wandering "Over many a tangle spray." In other words, from the ant's perspective, the grass that the speaker is lying on is a difficult terrain she must cross in search of her family. This image might even draw a parallel between the ant's struggle and the speaker's difficulties in the waking world: in "dark, benighted" times, even an ordinary stroll over the grass might seem like a dangerous and difficult journey.

The last stanza, though, provides some consolation. When the glow-worm arrives and tells the ant to follow the "beetle's hum" all the way home, that onomatopoeic "hum" feels cozy and ordinary. It's as if the beetle, going about his ordinary business, is just humming a tune to himself. To him, this image suggests, the world doesn't feel like a menacing, "tangled" place—he's just "go[ing] his round," a reassuring figure cutting through the ant's fear.

The poem's imagery thus helps to set up—and resolve—a miniature drama.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "Dark, benighted, travel-worn, / Over many a tangle spray,"
- **Line 19:** "Follow now the beetle's hum;"

CAESURA

The poem uses caesura to pace the poem and to create rhythm.

In the first stanza, there are no caesurae—the stanza is smooth and flowing and isn't slowed down by pauses within lines. In contrast, the second stanza contains quite a bit of caesura:

> Troubled, || wildered, || and forlorn,
> Dark, || benighted, || travel-worn,
> Over many a tangle spray,
> All heart-broke, || I heard her say:

The first two lines in break at roughly the same point, and so echo each other's rhythms. In comparison to the dreamy smoothness of the first stanza, the string of pauses in these lines evokes the ant's exhaustion and her difficult progress "over many a tangle spray." This halting list of descriptions also suggests all the different ways that someone might find themselves in need of guidance—because they are distressed, or because they are lost, or because they can't see clearly (both literally and figuratively). And the caesura after "heart-broke" helps to isolate the phrase, drawing attention to the emotional state of both the ant and the speaker.

In line 9, meanwhile, the ant's exclamation—"Oh my children!"—breaks right into the line. This dramatic pause imbues the moment with emotion: there's no ignoring that exclamation point.

Toward the end of the poem, caesurae also introduce gentler moments: the glow-worm's first speech, and its final words of encouragement to the ant:

> Little wanderer, || hie thee home!"

These caesurae, which fall right in the middle of their respective lines, create a gentle, cradle-like rocking rhythm that fits these moments of hope and consolation.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Troubled, wildered, and"
- **Line 6:** "Dark, benighted, travel-worn"
- **Line 8:** "heart-broke, I"
- **Line 9:** "children! do"
- **Line 15:** "replied, "What"
- **Line 20:** "wanderer, hie"

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Anthropomorphism makes this poem feel both childlike and dreamlike. The poem anthropomorphizes an ant, a glow-worm, and a beetle, imbuing them not only with human qualities, but (in the case of the glow-worm and the beetle) divine ones.

The ant is described as having "lost its way" among a "tangle[d] spray" of plants and grasses; now she is separated from her family and is therefore "all heart-broke." The ant speaks for herself: she is her own character. This makes the poem feel more like a fable—that is, a kind of morality tale with animal protagonists.

The moral, it seems, is that the world is inherently benevolent and that help is available to those who ask for it. When the anthropomorphized glow-worm appears and describes itself as "the watchman of the night," it seems to offer an almost angelic guidance (much like the angel said to "guard[]" the speaker's bed at the beginning of the poem). Shedding light in the darkness and showing the ant the way home, this glow-worm seems like a divine protector, always ready to answer the ant's cries.

Insects aren't the only things being personified in this poem: the "dream" itself is also said to "weave a shade," like an artisan. While this can be interpreted to mean that sleep brings with it literal "shade" (or darkness), the word "shade" might also be understood as a kind of enchantment. In other words, the dream, like some kind of sorcerer, "weaves" an enchantment over the speaker, so that they find themselves in a strange

world where insects talk and impart important lessons.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 3-12
- Lines 14-20

END-STOPPED LINE

While a few of the poem's lines are enjambed, most are end-stopped. The mix of enjambed and end-stopped lines helps to pace the poem.

For instance, the first stanza contains two enjambed lines, and thus moves quickly, fluidly setting the scene and introducing the dream itself.

In contrast, the second stanza contains *only* end-stopped lines:

> Troubled, wildered, and forlorn,
> Dark, benighted, travel-worn,
> Over many a tangle spray,
> All heart-broke, I heard her say:

By encouraging the reader to pause at the end of every line (not to mention *within* lines, due to all those caesurae), end-stopped lines slow the poem down considerably, creating a stop-and-start rhythm that evokes the ant's hesitancy and uncertainty. The poem's end-stops help to emphasize its end rhymes, keeping the poem's nursery-rhyme flavor up front—and emphasizing that this is a childlike "Song of Innocence."

Lines 15-16 is the only other place in the poem that uses enjambment:

> Who replied, "What wailing wight
> Calls the watchman of the night?"

Enjambment here suggests the glow-worm's confidence. As opposed to the fearful hesitancy of the ant, whose every phrase ("do they cry," "Do they hear their father sigh," etc) is broken up by a pause, the glow-worm's speech feels more expansive and certain, even as it is asking a question. The glow-worm isn't afraid of or confused by the darkness of night because it is capable of illuminating that darkness.

The rest of the poem uses more firm end-stops. Listen to the glow-worm's final speech here:

> "I am set to light the ground,
> While the beetle goes his round:
> Follow now the beetle's hum;
> Little wanderer, hie thee home!"

These last few end-stops again draw attention to the rhymes—and in particular, to the musical slant rhyme between "hum" and "home." But they also make the glow-worm sound authoritative as it gives the ant simple, clear directions: perhaps it won't be so hard for her to get "home" as she expects.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "bed,"
- **Line 4:** "lay."
- **Line 5:** "forlorn,"
- **Line 6:** "travel-worn,"
- **Line 7:** "spray,"
- **Line 8:** "say:"
- **Line 9:** "cry,"
- **Line 10:** "sigh?"
- **Line 11:** "see,"
- **Line 12:** "me.""
- **Line 13:** "tear:"
- **Line 14:** "near,"
- **Line 17:** "ground,"
- **Line 18:** "round:"
- **Line 19:** "hum;"
- **Line 20:** "home!""

PARALLELISM

Parallelism gives the poem rhythm and musicality.

The poem's first moment of parallelism appears when the speaker gives this harrowing description of the ant's feelings—feelings the stanza's grammar suggests are also the speaker's:

> Troubled, wildered, and forlorn,
> Dark, benighted, travel-worn,

With one sad adjective after another, these similarly structured lines feel heavy and troubled, and evoke the feeling of plodding, lost and afraid, through a menacing landscape. Ant and speaker alike, these parallel lines suggest, are having a pretty rough time of it.

The poem also uses some anaphora in lines 9-10:

> Oh my children! do they cry,
> Do they hear their father sigh?

These repetitions lend rhythm to the poem, and evoke the ant's frantic thoughts as she worries for the well-being of her children.

Lines 11-12 do something similar:

> Now they look abroad to see,
> Now return and weep for me.

The anxious repetition of the word "Now" suggests that each and every moment, the ant is tormented by fear, imagining all the ways her family suffers in her absence. The back-and-forth actions of her children also suggest that they too are lost and confused without their mother, unsure of where to look for her or whether instead to grieve.

Parallelism thus helps the poem's rhythms to match and highlight its emotions.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Troubled, wildered, and forlorn, / Dark, benighted, travel-worn,"
- **Line 9:** "do they"
- **Line 10:** "Do they"
- **Line 11:** "Now"
- **Line 12:** "Now"

VOCABULARY

O'er (Line 2) - A contraction of the word "Over."

Emmet (Line 3) - An ant.

Methought (Line 4) - An archaic way of saying "it seemed to me" or "I thought."

Wildered (Line 5) - Lost or bewildered.

Forlorn (Line 5) - Miserable or heavy-hearted, with connotations of loneliness in particular.

Benighted (Line 6) - Ignorant or unenlightened; overtaken by darkness.

Travel-worn (Line 6) - Weary from traveling.

Many a tangle spray (Line 7) - That is, many knotty clusters of branches and plants.

Heart-broke (Line 8) - Heart-broken.

Glow-worm (Line 14) - Any of a number of insects which glow through bioluminescence (fireflies, for example).

Wight (Line 15) - A living being or creature.

Goes his round (Line 18) - Walks his usual path.

Hie thee home (Line 20) - To "hie" is to go somewhere fast, so the glow-worm is just saying, "get yourself home quickly!"

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Dream" consists of five four-line stanzas, or quatrains. This simple form, coupled with regular meter and rhyme (more on that in minute), gives the poem an almost nursery-rhyme feel—which makes sense, as this is one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, poems meant to evoke the clear-eyed delight of childhood. In fact, Blake felt children would understand his poems better than anyone.

That being said, there is a complexity to the poem that belies the apparent simplicity of the form. The poem may be expressing a childlike trust in the inherent goodness of the world, but trust alone doesn't necessarily make it so. This is why Blake published a second volume of corresponding poems titled *Songs of Experience*, a volume which expresses a more world-weary, adult perspective in contrast to *Song of Innocence*.

METER

"A Dream" is written in trochaic tetrameter: that is, each line contains four trochees, metrical feet with a DUM-da rhythm.

This is often called "falling meter" because the lines begin forcefully and then end on weaker unstressed syllables. This poem, however, uses catalexis, meaning that lines leave out that last unstressed syllable and end on strong stressed syllables. Take the first line, for example:

Once a | dream did | weave a | shade

Ending most lines on those strong stresses gives the poem a punchier, livelier tone. And in general, this simple, forceful, singsongy meter makes this poem feel like a nursery rhyme—fitting for a childlike "Song of Innocence."

RHYME SCHEME

The poem's simple rhyme scheme runs like this:

AABB

This uncomplicated pattern contributes to the poem's childlike tone: by tying each couplet into a neat little bow, the poem matches its rhymes to its reassuring tale of guidance and compassion. For example, the quick end-rhyme between "tear" and "near" in lines 13 and 14 suggests that the speaker barely has time to shed a single tear in response to the ant's plight before someone (in this case a "glow-worm") comes along to offer help.

While the majority of the end rhymes in this poem use full rhyme (that is, they rhyme exactly), the first and last rhymes are both slant. In lines 1 and 2, "shade" rhymes with "bed," contrasting the safety and comfort of a warm place to sleep with the uncertainty and fear children often associate with darkness.

And in the last two lines of the poem, the slant rhyme between "hum" and "home" perhaps complicates the simple idea that the ant can just follow the sound of the beetle home—the lack of a perfect rhyme might suggest that the ant might not make it back to her family so easily, after all.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is a child or a childlike figure remembering a dream they once had. In the dream, the speaker sees a lost ant crying out for her family, and a glow-worm coming to her aid. While the speaker mostly seems concerned with telling the ant's tale, the reader gets a sense of the speaker's own fears and preoccupations through that tale: the speaker, too, seems "troubled, wildered, and forlorn" and is quick to sympathetically "drop[] a tear" over the ant's plight.

In the final stanza, the glow-worm gives the ant instructions on how to return home, and its instructions ("Little wanderer, hie thee home!") feel applicable to the speaker as well. Because the poem ends with this line, readers might imagine that the speaker awakes in their own "angel-guarded bed," no longer frightened and far from home.

SETTING

The poem is set inside the speaker's dreaming mind.

In the dream, the speaker is lying "on grass" and encounters an ant that has "lost its way" in the dark night and is now separated from its family. Down at the ant's level, the landscape is rugged: the ant is weary from traveling "Over many a tangle spray" (that is, the wild, daunting plants and grasses).

Hearing the ant's pitiful cries, a "glow-worm" emerges and offers advice on how she might return home. It tells her to "Follow now the beetle's hum." The glow-worm and beetle's light and "hum" become a comforting presence in a wilderness, a source of guidance in a strange land.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

William Blake (1757-1827) is revered as one of the most unique and influential figures in the history of English literature. Though he is now often considered the first of the Romantic poets because of his ideals regarding nature, the imagination, and creativity, he was considered peculiar and even deranged in his own time. Unlike contemporaries such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, he struggled to find an audience—either popular or critical—that understood or appreciated his work.

Part of this is due to the visionary quality of Blake's poetry. Blake spoke of witnessing angels and other spiritual phenomena since his early childhood, and these experiences informed his work to such a degree that even Coleridge, himself a visionary, remarked that he was quite "common-place" compared to Blake.

Blake first published "A Dream" in his 1789 book *Songs of Innocence*, which in 1794 he republished as an expanded collection called *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. As a whole, this two-part collection explores the contrasting sides of human nature, and can be seen as a reenvisioning of the Biblical tale of the Garden of Eden and humanity's fall from grace.

Blake's writing was meant to instill moral lessons, but not simple ones: the deceptively plainspoken poems of *Innocence and Experience* can be interpreted in many ways. Many of the poems in *Innocence* correspond directly to a poem in *Experience*; for instance, "A Dream" is paralleled by "The Angel," which also details a dream and the guardianship of angels. But while "A Dream" depicts compassion as a connection to the divine, nature, and each other, "The Angel" has a more world-weary tone, and explores what happens when people lose this connection.

One of Blake's most important influences was John Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* influence this poem's lost-and-found narrative. Blake revered Milton: not only did he create four different sets of illustrations for *Paradise Lost*, he wrote an epic poem called "Milton" in which Milton's spirit enters Blake's foot and leads him into "The City of Art." In other words, Blake credited Milton with his very creativity, and felt an intensely personal connection to his work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Blake didn't just write poetry: he illustrated, hand-engraved, printed, and distributed his own poems. His illustrations often deepen, complicate, or even contradict the narratives they accompany.

He used an original, ground-breaking method to create his books: rather than carving *into* the copper plates used in printing, he would paint both poems and pictures directly onto his plates with a resilient ink, then submerge them in an acid bath, so that the material *around* the images was seared away. His process was an expression of his belief that the artist's job is to "melt[] apparent surfaces away" so that everything "appear[s] to man as it is, infinite."

This belief was at the heart of Blake's work and life. Blake was profoundly religious, but critical of organized religion, which he saw as detrimental to a more natural and direct relationship between human beings and the divine. He was also influenced by the revolutions (French and American) taking place around him. Seeing that societal and religious constructs could be broken down and new liberties gained, Blake used his work to address social issues like the mistreatment of children and racism.

The Industrial Revolution was also heavy on Blake's mind. He worried human beings were losing touch with nature, and therefore with God, themselves, and one another. In "A Dream," for instance, humanity and nature are all in communion with

the divine. Just as the glow-worm's light and "the beetle's hum" are a lifeline for the lost ant, nature, Blake believed, could provide guidance and instruction. In his view, *feeling* (i.e. the ant's cries, the speaker's tears), not intellect, allows one to access the earth's inherent wisdom.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OPDZsMqxQg)
- The Poem Illuminated — See the poem in its original form: a hand-engraved, illuminated print made by Blake himself. (http://www.blakearchive.org/copy/s-inn.b?descId=s-inn.b.illbk.18)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Blake's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-blake)
- Songs of Innocence and Experience — Take a look at images of the first edition of Songs of Innocence and Experience, the lavishly illustrated collection this poem comes from. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience)
- Blake's Legacy — Read author Philip Pullman's reflection on Blake's continuing influence. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/philip-pullman-william-blake-and-me)
- Blake's Printing Method — A look at Blake's print-making process and how it relates to his poetry and visual art. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96LUAaaPqRc)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Poison Tree
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Clod and the Pebble
- The Divine Image
- The Ecchoing Green
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Little Black Boy
- The Sick Rose
- The Tyger

HOW TO CITE

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